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ABSTRACT

Media attention and public concern focused on child sexual abuse in day care have presented early childhood educators with opportunities to educate parents, the public, and the media about child sexual abuse and quality child care. This paper provides information concerning the sexual abuse of children in day care settings. Topics addressed include (1) the incidence of the problem, (2) ways day care may be preventing child abuse, (3) supervision of children in day care, (4) parent participation in day care programs, (5) day care programs for preventing sexual abuse, and (6) the importance of touch and physical acts of affection for the development of healthy children. A four-page list of references concludes the document. (RH)

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Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones: Child Sexual Abuse and Day Care

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Running Head: CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND DAY CARE

Abstract

Media attention and public concern focused on child sexual abuse in day care have presented early childhood educators with opportunities to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones by educating parents, the public, and the media about both child sexual abuse and quality child care. Suggestions are given for information that parents and the media should consider in light of current concern about child sexual abuse in day care.

Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones: Child Sexual Abuse and Day Care

Early childhood educators dream of adequate public attention to child care; unfortunately, recent highly publicized events have turned that dream into a nightmare and have focused both media attention and public concern on child day care. This concern is easily understood in view of the number of children in some form of nonparental care. Nearly 25 million children 13 years and younger now live in families in which all parents present work outside the home. More than 6 million preschool children have employed mothers (Hayghe, 1984); researchers predict 10.5 million preschoolers with employed mothers by the end of this decade (Hofferth, 1979). In the 1980s there are fewer than two million slots in licensed day care centers--fewer than 40 years ago (Clarke-Stewart, 1982). The remaining children stay with relatives, babysitters, unlicensed child care providers, or care for themselves while their parents work.

Public concern about day care has now become inextricably linked with concern about child sexual abuse. The sexual abuse of children is a problem that, by its very nature, is so furtive that there are no precise figures on its frequency. Various researchers have estimated that between 100,000 and 500,000 children are sexually abused each year (Finkelhor, 1984). A less conservative

estimate is that 1 million children are sexual abuse victims (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, 1982). Twenty-five percent of the reported cases involve preschool children (Finkelhor, 1979).

This public attention has required not only child care professionals, but also parents and other concerned adults, to confront the problems of how to identify child sexual abuse, how to observe and document its occurrence, how to understand its effects on its victims, and how to protect the child-victim-as-witness in subsequent court testimony and proceedings; these issues have created enormous complexity for parents, teachers, and policymakers. And while reports of child sexual abuse have been increasing and public attention and concern have been growing, resources for addressing the complex problem have been dwindling. Although reports of child sexual abuse have more than doubled since 1981, federal funding for child abuse prevention programs decreased by 40% from 1981 to 1984 (Children's Defense Fund, 1984).

Thus, at the same time that the need for adequate day care is growing, fears about its safety are growing also. This means that early childhood educators must seize every opportunity to turn these stumbling blocks into stepping stones to educate parents, the public, and the media about both child care and sexual abuse. Following, then, are suggestions for early childhood educators and directors.

Abuse in day care: How widespread is the problem?

Although much of the media focus on the child sexual abuse issue has been objective and even educational, some reports leave the distorted impression that sexual abuse in day care is very widespread. In reality, the available statistics indicate that less than 2% of child sexual abuse occurs in day care (Howell, 1985). Statistically, children are at greater risk in their own homes. Of the child sexual abuse offenders, 40% are related to the victim; in 90% of the sexual abuse cases the offender is known to the child or family (Finkelhor, 1979). Knowing that only a very small percentage of sexual abuse occurs in day care may free the public from unwarranted fears about the safety of children in day care.

The U. S. Congress and many state legislators have discussed and debated legislation that would increase regulation of child care workers and programs. Frequently mentioned are provisions to fingerprint child care workers and require police checks into their backgrounds; in Tennessee alone the cost to monitor child care personnel in such a way would be $1.5 million for the first year. Because up to 42% of all workers in day care centers leave and are replaced each year, (Wanted: Experienced Teachers, 1984), a substantial proportion of this amount would be needed every year to check new entrants to the profession. In light of the small percentage of reported sexual abuse cases that occur in day care, many parents and professionals believe that such checks would offer

only minor prevention at enormous cost.

Day care may actually help prevent child abuse.

Quality child care may actually be a crucial preventive service for many families. Working parents who lack available and affordable child care often suffer stress from role overload (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976); Kempe and Kempe (1978) have identified and discussed the role of stress in abusive families. Day care centers may serve as crisis centers for parents and children; some are open 24 hours a day for just such needs. In one report of child abuse cases representing 165,000 children, fewer than 6% of the families used any nonparental care to provide relief from child rearing tasks (Children's Defense Fund, 1982). In addition, quality day care in which children can develop trust and attachment to secondary caregivers is actually therapeutic for children subject to abuse (Kempe & Kempe, 1978).

Child care programs may also serve to lessen the likelihood of sexual abuse by promoting positive self-concepts in children. Children with low self-esteem are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse (DeFrancis, 1969; Sanford, 1980). The child with a poor self-image is enticed more easily by a perpetrator who offers a "shared secret" or "special friendship" (Sanford, 1980, p. 235). Many child care programs strive to provide children with developmentally appropriate activities to ensure each child successful and rewarding experiences to promote self-esteem. The

child with high self-esteem is less likely to be selected as an abuse target and may be more likely to say "no" to a potential abuser.

Day care affords supervision for safety.

Most child care programs are organized so that no child is left unsupervised or at risk from any harm. Whenever parents express concern about the safety of their children in nonparental care, child care workers should use the opportunity to discuss the organizational strategies they use to observe and supervise children; they can further point out how they structure the day care environment to promote learning experiences (Twardosz, 1984; Twardosz, Cataldo, & Risley, 1974). Supervision is a concern not only with respect to child care programs; it is estimated that there are 7 million children who remain unsupervised or in sibling care while parents work (Children's Defense Fund, 1982). Parents and child care professionals are well aware of this demand; the public, the media, and government should be invited to create community solutions.

Successful day care involves parents.

The importance of parental involvement in early childhood education has been well documented (Berger, 1981; Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Rutherford & Edgar, 1979). Even so, parents and teachers may sometimes feel tensions between their respective roles (The sexual abuse issue: How can child care providers respond, 1984); the specter of child abuse may exacerbate these natural tensions. Only

if parents are involved in their children's education and in contact with their children's teachers can these tensions be handled constructively.

To facilitate heightened communication with and involvement of parents, many teachers invite them to visit and observe the center's activities. Many professionals are encouraging state licensing agencies to incorporate this "open door" requirement into licensing standards. Parents should be reminded that licensing indicates only that a center has met minimum standards. Even licensed centers may be monitored by state licensing personnel no more than once every 3 years; some states use a registration system which requires no monitoring at all (Johnson, 1982). Parents, then, become the most effective and valuable advocates for consumer protection in child care.

Education of parents, the public, and the media should also be focused on the outcomes associated with day care and early education. A fairly extensive research literature supports the economic benefits to society of early childhood education (Weikart, Epstein, Schweinhart, & Bond, 1978), the educational impact (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983), and the positive effects of day care on children and families (for comprehensive reviews, see Belsky & Steinberg, 1978; Snow, 1983).

Day care programs to prevent sexual abuse.

Using books, puppets, role-playing, and other curriculum materials appropriate for preschoolers, many day care programs have begun teaching children skills they themselves can use to avoid sexual assault. (For an annotated bibliography of recommended resources, see Koblinsky and Behana, 1984.) Other centers are emphasizing programs that teach children safety skills, that encourage open communication between children and adults about stressful events or sensitive topics (Allen & Figley, 1982), or that help preschoolers learn information about and respect for their own bodies (Allen & Pettit, 1982). Although some of these program goals have existed for some time, they are now receiving special emphasis in light of concerns over child sexual abuse.

The role that child care programs have in educating children about child sexual abuse is particularly important relative to the public nature of day care versus the private nature of the family (Allen & Fox, 1985). For example, in one popular book offering parents suggestions to protect their children from sexual abuse, parents are instructed that "it is not appropriate to suggest to children that members of their family would sexually abuse them" (Kraizer, 1985, p. 36). In reality, children need to understand that "bad touches could come from someone the child knows" (Koblinsky & Behana, 1984, p. 7).

Touch is essential to healthy child development.

Early childhood educators understand the important and necessary role of touch and physical affection in healthy child development and child care and recently have been encouraged to continue to nurture children with touch (Crissey, 1984; Mazur & Pekor, 1985). Parents should be helped to understand the ways in which child care workers appropriately use touch and physical affection with children in self-esteem and body image development, in physical guidance, and as a model of healthy physical contact (Allen, in press).

Conclusion.

The horrifying spector of child sexual abuse haunts parents and day care professionals alike. Feelings of fear, helplessness, and frustration threaten the trust relationship between parents and caregivers. Directors and teachers must work closely and openly with parents by offering information, suggesting relevant readings, and educating parents about child sexual abuse and prevention. Parents' and teachers' shared concern reflect their shared commitment for quality child care for young children.

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